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A framework for classifying the content of online reviews of formalwear rented online

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Keywords: online review, formalwear, rented online

While online reviews are regarded as a key ingredient in product success, little is known about the content of online reviews of apparel products. This study focuses on online reviews found on Rent the Runway (RTR), a very successful firm, which provides consumers who want to wear designer formalwear for special occasions the opportunity to rent at a fraction of the retail price. Researching content of online reviews is important as it allows understanding of the evaluative criteria consumers use and report in online reviews. However, there has been no study to date to investigate online reviews of formalwear rented online. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the textual information generated by female consumers about formalwear rented online. The research question was: What are the key themes underpinning the content of online reviews of formalwear rented online?

Content analysis, a technique used for gathering and analyzing the context of text (Neuman, 2011), was used in two study has two phases: preliminary and main study. For both phases, relatively high intercoder reliabilities from 93.4% to 96.3% were found by using percentage agreement.

In the preliminary phase, coding schemes were developed from 201 collected online reviews of every 50th of the 10,000 most recent reviews of RTR formalwear. Seven key themes were found: (a) E-service characteristic, (b) strategies for getting better fit, (c) clothing attributes, (d) social context, (e) descriptive information intended to help other consumers, (f) recommendation, and (g) loyalty or future intention. Most themes were newly developed, while two themes on clothing attributes (fit, color, etc.) and social context were adopted from previous studies (Abraham-Mulali, 1995; Eckman, Damhorst, & Kadolph, 1990; Shin, 2013).

For the main study, systematic sampling was used to collect 600 online reviews. Frequency of the seven key themes was calculated (Figure 1). Content within each theme was explored. E-service was mentioned positively when consumers experienced fast delivery or perceived ease of service, but negatively when they received the wrong dress or size or the dress arrived in bad condition (worn, wrinkled). Strategies for getting better fit when wearing the received dress included: (a) wearing heels or flats to improve the length of the dress, (b) wearing a particular type of bra (padded, nude, etc), (b) wearing other specific undergarments (slip, spanx, etc), (c) wearing a belt, and (d) using fashion tapes and/or pins. Reviewers also mentioned non-dress strategies helpful to them getting better fit: (a) customer service provided by RTR, (b) advice from an RTR personal fit stylist (phone or online), (c) other consumers' reviews, (d) detailed fit information provided by RTR in the dress description, and (e) RTR's option to order second size dress as a backup. Clothing attributes mentioned included fit (overall fit and multi-aspect fit—physical, aesthetic, and functional), and other clothing attributes (color, pattern, etc.). Social context found in online reviews included how the rented dresses were appropriate for the occasion and verbal and non-verbal social feedback from others. Descriptive information

reviewers provided for other consumers included: (a) reviewers' usual fit problems on different body areas (bust, hip, back, height, upper body, lower body), (b) usual size and how the dress compares, and (c) what they wore with the dress (accessories, bag, stocking/tights, color or brand of shoes).

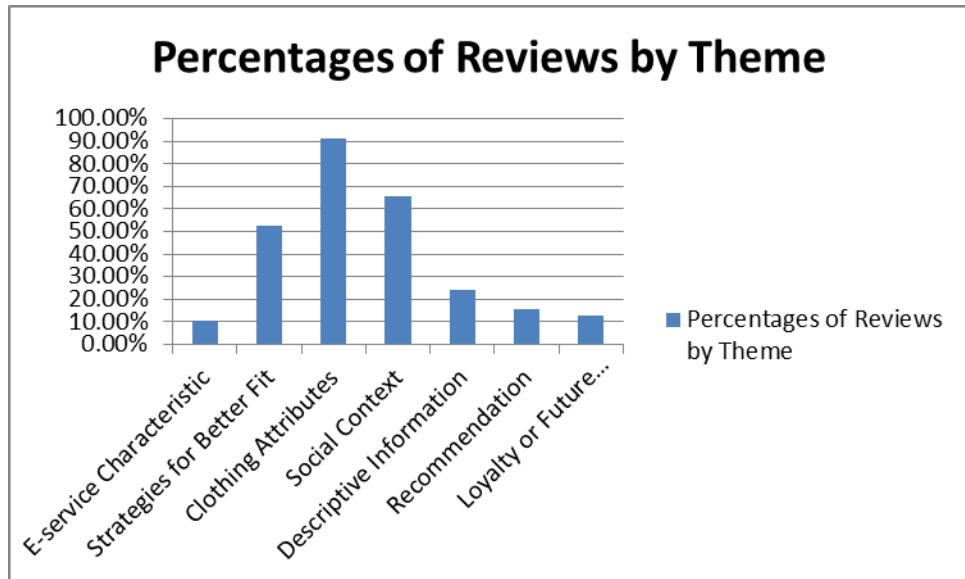


Figure 1 Percentage of reviews by theme

Recommendation

of RTR and/or the worn dress tended to be mentioned if reviewers were satisfied with the formalwear rented online overall. Loyalty and future intention comments were related to the same dress, another dress, or RTR service.

Our aim for this research was to better understand the nature and key aspects of the content found in online reviews of formalwear rented online by female consumers. This understanding helps researchers recognize which criteria consumers consider important in evaluating formalwear rented online. The first contribution of this paper is the framework developed for classifying the textual content of online reviews of formalwear rented online. This can inform future research that links together the trigger/motives of the reviewer, the content written, and the subsequent action of the reader. For marketers, this information has two practical roles: (1) it helps in understanding the information needs which may significantly affect consumers' renting behavior; (2) this research provides insight into what features female consumers talk about in their renting experience in negative and positive ways.

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